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Hotel and Restaurant Entry-Level Job Competencies: Comparisons of Management and Worker Perceptions

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a central Florida study of lodging and restaurant managers as well as entry-level workers who were graduates of hospitality management programs. It provides a theoretical construct as a basis of the methodology employed. The article then reports the findings of perceptions of desired knowledge, skills and abilities, and attitudes associated with entry-level employees. It further compares desired levels of preparation for entry-level positions in the industry as reported by respondents of both groups. Finally, the authors present conclusions and implications for central Florida practitioners and educators.

Keywords

Entry-Level Jobs, Management Perceptions, Worker Perceptions, Lodging, Restaurant, Florida

Hotel and Restaurant Entry-Level Job Competencies: Comparisons of Management and Worker Perceptions

By Dana V. Tesone and Peter Ricci

This article presents the findings of a central Florida study of lodging and restaurant managers as well as entry-level workers who were graduates of hospitality management programs. It provides a theoretical construct as a basis of the methodology employed. The article then reports the findings of perceptions of desired knowledge, skills and abilities, and attitudes associated with entry-level employees. It further compares desired levels of preparation for entry-level positions in the industry as reported by respondents of both groups. Finally, the authors present conclusions and implications for central Florida practitioners and educators.

COMPETENCIES AND EDUCATION

A number of hospitality and tourism college and university programs boast of substantial growth since the inception of the first such school more than 80 years ago (*Guide to College*, 2004). Enrollments have continuously increased in business administration schools at both the secondary and tertiary levels. At the same time, the number of hospitality and tourism magnet schools, and college and university programs has continuously increased. In fact, over the past 30 years, the number of hospitality-degree-granting programs has grown from just 41 in 1974 to over 170 in 2004 (Brady, 1988). This rapid pattern of program expansion includes wide variations among curricular styles and content, which fact could be the cause for managers' criticism of the graduates they hire from these institutions (Beckley, 2002; Chang & Yeado, 2003). Therefore, the authors of this study sought to ascertain how graduates of these programs perceived their preparation level when they became entry-level employees.

It has been reported that the hospitality industry and, in particular, the lodging and foodservice sectors, have suffered from high employee turnover (Birdir, 2002). Educators, human resources professionals, and operations managers strive to reduce turnover numbers by identifying valid job competencies in future managers, improving hiring practices, and recruiting from educational programs known for producing future managers with strong industry success potential (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Guglielmino & Carroll, 1979; Kay & Russette, 2000; Milman & Ricci, 2004).. Anecdotal evidence, as well as reports from the respondents in this study, indicate that a small number of lodging and foodservice managers possess degrees in business administration or hospitality. The majority of degreed

managers who participated in this study were trained in arts and sciences. Possibly many of these managers did not have the choice to study hospitality management in college. Further, the majority of the managers took no baccalaureate hospitality management courses. Even in 2002, only 8.46% of U.S. colleges and universities offering baccalaureate degrees had a hospitality management program (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000-2001). Conversely, one could speculate that larger hospitality-school enrollments generate larger numbers of program graduates who accept entry-level industry positions. For these reasons, it seems appropriate to understand the competency perceptions of industry management practitioners, as well as those individuals who are entering the hospitality industry after graduating from colleges and universities.

Educators could profit from understanding the job competencies that hospitality managers expect from high school and college graduates. The relationship of educational factors to potential industry success remains an important and understudied area of the hospitality human resources literature (Dittman, 1997; Getty, Tas, & Getty, 1991; Hsu, Gilmore, & Walsh, 1992; Tas, 1983; Tas, 1988). Educators might also gain insight from knowing hospitality graduates' perceptions of entry-level job competencies. From a practical perspective, senior managers are ultimately responsible for accomplishing organizational objectives by supervising employees (Walker, 2004). Further, the perceptions of entry-level workers might provide a mirror to the knowledge, skills and abilities, and attitudes deemed important for successful job performance based on views assimilated from the educational program.

COMPETENCIES DEFINED

One view of worker competency begins with the goal of job performance and looks back at the strategies and tactics used to accomplish that objective (Naquin & Holton, 2003). This is consistent with longstanding viewpoints on the relationship of knowledge and skills as requirements for task performance leading to comprehensive job performance (McClelland, 1973). While knowledge and skills do facilitate task performance, many lodging and restaurant hiring executives claim they hire for attitude and train for skills. Hence, there are affective components that may be considered to be included in the competency package of newly hired entry-level workers (Adler, 1986; Grace, 1994; Morrison, 1992; Schreiber, Price, & Morrison, 1993). In fact, over the past few decades the ample definitive literature identifies mostly knowledge, skills, and attitudes as attributes associated with worker competency at all levels of organizations (McLaugan, 1996). Human

resources professionals have been known to infuse a fourth category, called *abilities*, under the commonly noted Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, Attitudes (KSAA) model of job competencies (Tesone, 1995). However, it could be argued that abilities consist of blended attributes that could be combined factors of knowledge and skills. Existing literature that is specific to the areas of lodging and foodservice operations seems to concur with the KSAA approach to defining worker competencies (Perdue, Woods, & Ninemeier, 2001; Rutherford, 1987; Sapienza, 1978).

ATTITUDINAL COMPETENCIES

The inclusion of the category of *attitudes* within the competencies model led the researchers to examine theoretical foundations surrounding personality states (individual preferences for responses to environmental stimuli) that are purported to exist within the minds of individuals (Cattell, 1957; Holland, 1997; Jung, 1954). Intuitive thinking on the part of experienced hospitality practitioners would indicate anecdotal typologies of personality types that should profile the appropriate attitudes of the ideal hospitality worker. For instance, the Jungian-based models of personality profiles would suggest that an extroverted, perceptive individual is suitable for employment in the industry. From Holland's perspective, a social, enterprising, artistic person might be expected to gravitate toward the hospitality profession. Cattell's model would suggest that gregarious, nurturing, and creative individuals might be best suited for hospitality careers.

These models are helpful for understanding personality types, but less so for identifying attitudes compatible with hospitality competencies. At least this was the case with a couple of studies that attempted to fit an anecdotally based hospitality profile into the categories provided by these models (Chen, 2004). In fact, another study provided a description of these models, only to demonstrate that inconsistencies existed among attributes associated within compared model categories (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). However, one could posit that individual descriptors extracted from the literature surrounding various theoretical constructs might be used to hypothesize a unique combination of suitable factors. These could be preliminarily tested as components of attitudinal competencies associated with entry-level hospitality workers.

The literature yielded a small number of studies that identified unconscious mental strategies that may contribute to the attitudinal competencies of hospitality entry-level workers (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). One strategy identifies individual *reference* preferences. *Self-referent* people will take care of their own needs before the needs of others, while

others-referent individuals will do the opposite, which ties to selflessness. Internal *movement* strategies determine a predisposition for an individual to move toward possibilities (achievement) versus avoiding negative outcomes (avoidance). A third internal strategy has to do with *contextual intelligence*, in which an individual possesses the capacity to rapidly process information and alter behaviors based on various environmental factors (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). A person with this internal strategy is commonly referred to as a *quick study*. These people are acutely aware of the realities surrounding a situation and have a knack for anticipating the needs of others. They tend to deal with environmental uncertainties through adaptation and change. This unconscious mental strategy connects with concepts of assertiveness and social collaboration, both of which could contribute to teamwork.

THE STUDY

The researchers hypothesized that managers might consider one or many of the mentioned traits and strategies to be important competencies for entry-level hospitality workers. However, no attempt was made to influence these participants during any phase of the study. Instead, the researchers compared the information presented by the managers with the concepts and strategies listed above.

During the initial phase of the study, the researchers took from the literature a list of personality descriptors that seemed to typify ideal lodging and restaurant workers (Bandler & Grinder; Bennis & Thomas; Cattell; Holland; Jung). These included intrinsic motivations toward the following: empathy, creativity, nurturing (helping others), assertiveness, achievement, social collaboration, selflessness, contextual awareness, and environmental aesthetics.

The findings from initial focus groups were used to develop a 42-item questionnaire rating the levels of importance of each entry-level competency. The questionnaire was administered to a pilot group of managers in central Florida ($n=40$). The purpose of this preliminary investigation was to explore the factor structure underlying the items in the questionnaire, thereby verifying consistency with previously published literature. The maximum likelihood estimation procedure was used to extract the factors. Kaiser's rule was used to determine which factors were most eligible for interpretation. This is not unreasonable given that factor analysis has as its objective reducing several variables into fewer factors. Using this rule, three factors (categories) were extracted, explaining roughly 74.08% of all the variable variances. Additionally, respondent ratings of knowledge, skills and ability, and attitude for new-

hires in the lodging industry were judged to be highly reliable for the managers to whom it was given, with a reliability of .9509.

The sample consisted of experienced lodging and restaurant managers ($n=137$, 51.7% of the total sample) and new entrants to the hospitality workforce ($n=128$, 48.3% of the total sample). The investigators administered the questionnaire to the managers and received 137 appropriate responses. The rank order of Likert-type 5 point scale responses (5=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree) are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Knowledge, Skills/Abilities, and Attitudes Expected by Managers

Rank		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge				
1	Knowledge of grooming and professional image standards	137	4.43	0.83
2	Knowledge of guest services standards	137	4.28	0.82
3	Knowledge of the realities involved in this type of work	137	4.11	0.94
4	Knowledge of business management and ethics	137	3.97	0.83
5	Knowledge of hospitality products and services	137	3.78	0.93
6	Knowledge of basic terminology used in the industry	137	3.69	0.89
7	Knowledge of the leadership and organizational structure	137	3.69	0.99
Skills and Ability				
1	Ability to work as part of a team	137	4.57	0.73
2	Effective listening, verbal and written communication skills	137	4.51	0.70
3	Ability to project a professional image	137	4.50	0.73
4	Ability to empathize with the guest experience	137	4.41	0.75
5	Ability to anticipate guest wants and needs to provide service.	137	4.40	0.80
6	Ability to deal with daily uncertainties and changes in routine	137	4.26	0.87
7	Ability to balance the needs of multiple guests at a given time	137	4.25	0.78
8	Ability to generate an attitude of trust among co-workers	137	4.18	0.74
9	Ability to make creative decisions to achieve service standards	137	4.15	0.87
10	Ability to minimize use of resources while providing services	137	3.82	0.96
11	Administrative skills for cash/credit settlements, forms, and reports	137	3.81	0.86

Attitude				
1	Takes personal pride in satisfying the needs of others	137	4.31	0.76
2	Prefers helping others before the satisfying the needs of the self	137	4.23	0.79
3	Tendency to move toward possibilities, as opposed to avoiding negative outcomes	137	4.18	0.83
4	Defines self as empathetic to the needs of others	137	4.13	0.74
5	Prefers working with people over working with administrative tasks	137	4.10	0.84
6	Defines self as outgoing and social	137	4.06	0.84
7	Prefers solving problems over following procedures	137	4.04	0.84
8	Prefers working in pleasant surroundings over clinical environments	137	4.00	0.86
9	Prefers working as part of a team over doing individualized work	137	3.97	0.81
10	Prefers each day to be different over each day being the same	137	3.95	0.93
11	Prefers challenging work over regimented work	137	3.94	0.93
12	Believes hard work is rewarded through promotion	137	3.91	0.97
13	Prefers creative work over analytical work	137	3.84	0.90

For the next step in the study, researchers administered the same survey to respondents ($n=128$) who were entry-level workers and graduates of hospitality management baccalaureate-degree programs. The results of entry-level worker ratings as compared with those of practicing managers are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Perceived Competencies of Importance to New Workers and Practicing Managers

Manager Rank	Worker Rank		Worker Mean	Manager Mean
Knowledge				
2	1	Knowledge of guest services standards	4.63	4.28
1	2	Knowledge of grooming and professional image standards	4.31	4.43
6	3	Knowledge of basic terminology used in the industry	4.22	3.69
3	4	Knowledge of the realities involved in this type of work	4.16	4.11
4	5	Knowledge of business and management ethics	4.13	3.97
5	6	Knowledge of hospitality products and services	4.13	3.78
7	7	Knowledge of the leadership and organizational structure	4.06	3.69

Skills and Ability				
1	1	Ability to work as part of a team	4.69	4.57
2	2	Effective listening, verbal and written communication skills	4.63	4.51
3	3	Ability to project a professional image	4.56	4.50
5	4	Ability to anticipate guest wants and needs to provide service.	4.50	4.40
8	5	Ability to generate an attitude of trust among co-workers	4.47	4.18
4	6	Ability to empathize with the guest experience	4.44	4.41
7	7	Ability to balance the needs of multiple guests at a given time	4.38	4.25
9	8	Ability to make creative decisions to achieve service standards	4.25	4.15
10	9	Ability to minimize use of resources while providing services	4.16	3.82
6	10	Ability to deal with daily uncertainties and changes in routine	4.16	4.26
11	11	Administrative skills for cash/credit settlements, forms and reports	4.09	3.81
Attitude				
1	1	Takes personal pride in satisfying the needs of others	4.53	4.31
12	2	Believes hard work is rewarded through promotion	4.44	3.91
6	3	Defines self as outgoing and social	4.34	4.06
2	4	Prefers helping others before satisfying the needs of the self	4.31	4.23
8	5	Prefers working in pleasant surroundings over clinical environments	4.31	4.00
3	6	Tendency to move toward possibilities, as opposed to avoiding negative outcomes	4.28	4.18
4	7	Defines self as empathetic to the needs of others	4.28	4.13
9	8	Prefers working as part of a team over doing individualized work	4.25	3.97
11	9	Prefers challenging work over regimented work	4.22	3.94
10	10	Prefers each day to be different over each day being the same	4.19	3.95
7	11	Prefers solving problems over following procedures	4.06	4.04
5	12	Prefers working with people over working with administrative tasks	4.03	4.10
13	13	Prefers creative work over analytical work	4.03	3.84

ANALYSIS

Respondents from both groups within the sample (managers and workers) were given the same precise and consistent set of instructions during survey administration sessions. As might be expected, the range of mean scores for each competency attribute in all three categories was high and narrow for entry-level worker respondents (4.03-4.69) when compared with management practitioners (3.69-4.57). This suggests that worker respondents perceived each factor to be important, while experienced managers seemed to differentiate between more and less important perceptions.

Prima facie assessment of the compared rankings between means for both groups showed highly symmetrical ratings for the *knowledge* category of attributes. The ratings patterns of factors in the *skills and abilities* category were also somewhat consistent between respondent groups. The ranked perceptions in the third category of *attitude* rankings varied between groups for most attributes.

An independent samples *t* test evaluation was applied to determine differences between the means of the two independent groups in the sample (Green & Salkind, 2003). These data corroborated the researchers' initial observations by showing a statistical difference between groups for just one attribute in the *knowledge* category and two statements in the *skills and abilities* category. The category of *attitudes* had the highest number of statements: Five items had statistically significant, different mean competency-perception scores.

DISCUSSION

Both groups (managers and workers) within the sample reported similar rankings of responses concerning the perceived importance of attributes that constitute both *knowledge*, and *skills and abilities* competencies for entry-level lodging and foodservice workers. It might be assumed that the managers' reports were based on anecdotal observations of worker performance over years of experience ($m = 13.5$ years for the respondent group). However, this could not have been the case for the worker-respondent group, which reported an average of less than one year of full-time work experience. This group did report an average of 3.75 years of college-level training as hospitality management majors. The researchers speculated that this training may have influenced the perceptions of worker respondents. Future studies to compare these competency ratings among similar entry-level workers without hospitality college training could provide insight concerning the influence of

industry-specific preparatory programs on the competency perceptions of newly hired lodging and foodservice employees.

If hospitality management education was a factor of influence for the participants in this study, it appears as though school competency training and industry perceptions are consistent between educators and industry practitioners. At least this seems to be the case in the areas of *knowledge*, and *skills and abilities* competency categories. Future studies may compare perceptions among groups of practitioners and educators to test this relationship. Should the findings of such testing demonstrate a relationship, the researchers would be compelled to inquire about the disparity in the pattern of perceptions within the category of competency *attitudes*. The findings could call for the inclusion of affective competency training on the part of hospitality educators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND INDUSTRY PRACTITIONERS

The findings of this study provide direct implications for the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) in which it was conducted, as well as speculative consideration for the entire hospitality universe. One key implication is that hospitality workplace competencies may be adequately described in terms of *knowledge*, *skills and abilities*, and *attitudes*. This is consistent with the broad array of business and hospitality literature (Adler; Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau; Grace; McClelland; Morrison; Perdue & Ninemeier; Rutherford; Sapienza; Schreiber et al.; Tas; and others). While training in the areas of *knowledge*, and *skills and abilities* are somewhat straightforward, *attitudinal* learning requires affective outcomes associated with values and beliefs (Tesone, 2005). It is likely that these are shaped experientially over time in the absence of specific training interventions. Hence, experienced hospitality managers should tend to possess strong convictions in these areas relative to practitioners with minimal levels of experience. One by-product of participation in these types of studies is the “shared awareness” of attitudinal convictions on the part of experienced managers, which was evident in anecdotal responses to presentations of results provided as part of this investigation. This raises the question as to whether training interventions could influence the opinions of attitudinal competency attributes among less experienced workers.

The majority of management practitioners who participated in the study were not graduates of hospitality programs. In fact, the majority of those with college degrees had been educated in the arts and sciences. Conversely, all of the entry-level worker respondents were hospitality

management graduates. It may be possible to influence the attitudinal perceptions of learners in academic environments by incorporating values-based instruction across the curriculum (Giannoni, 2004). This type of learning would require the use of active-learning techniques to create virtual experiential grounding that is conducive to whole-brain discovery (Tesone, 2004). This technique poses applications to workplace affective training programs as well as those provided by academic institutions. Future studies might investigate relationships of values-based learning methods with entry-level worker attitudinal perceptions. It may be found that such training promotes this category of competency perceptions to levels consistent with workers with years of experience.

One factor that seems to be shaped in a person's early, formative years is a preference for responses to environmental stimuli (Cattell; Holland; Jung). Numerous instruments attempt to relate these tendencies to the occupational preferences of new entrants into the workforce. While off-the-shelf indicators may be used to create levels of general career interests in the minds of young workers, they seem to provide inadequate descriptions of the actual preference aspects of competent hospitality workers. In fact, preliminary steps in this study found that inconsistencies exist among descriptors as applied to the preferences of hospitality workers, which concurs with at least one report in the literature (Zohar & Marshall). Further, it was found that unconscious strategies were appropriate for inclusion in the *attitude* profile used in this study. Anecdotal observation suggests that some hospitality human resources practitioners rely upon off-the-shelf temperament indicators as part of pre-employment processes. This study suggests that industry-specific instruments would be more useful for pre-employment testing. Further replications of this study format may be used to benchmark profiles of successful workers for this application.

Similar studies may be used to develop preference testing instruments for institutions of higher learning. Applications might include hospitality program admissions, curriculum development, learning outcomes assessment, and internship/job placement services. The outcomes of these studies may pose implications for industry collaborative programs aimed at improving education/corporate relations, training initiatives, and the enhancement of practitioner competency-awareness levels among hiring executives. The most natural implication arising from the findings of this study would be a continuous stream of collaborative studies and initiatives producing mutually beneficial outcomes for industry practitioners, as well as representatives of hospitality educational programs.

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